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ROBOTICS

When inspiring future roboticists, think small, think cute

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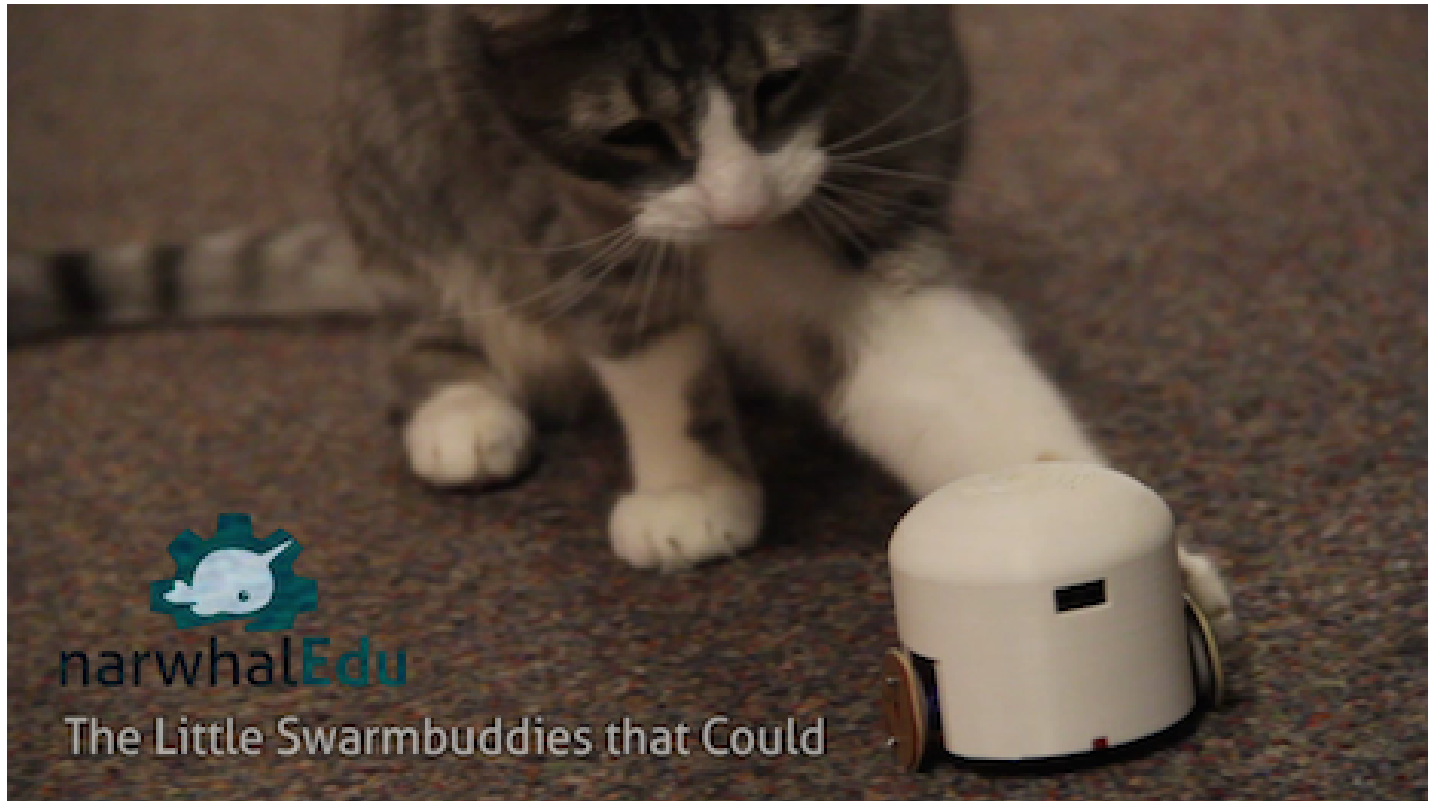
TOPICS

Robotics, MIT, Education, NarwhalEdu

What do a swarming group of glowing robots that hobnob with your house cat have to do with the future of STEM education? Everything, according to the founders of NarwhalEdu.

Nancy Ouyang and Cappie Pomeroy, 2013 MIT graduates, want to woo school kids into the STEM disciplines and help them “see engineering as friendly and approachable and creative” using tiny cute robots as catnip.

Through their startup NarwhalEdu, they hope to make cheap, easy-to-use coding kits available to the broadest range of the students, sort of like “Khan Academy with hardware project kits.” “You would just get the hardware in the mail and you wouldn’t have to find all the components,” Ouyang says.



The team funded their first product on Kickstarter last December and overshot their \$15,000 target by \$5,000. The product was a robotic arm that could be programmed to create certain shapes. Paired with the online class and community set up on the edX MOOC platform, the goal is to remove the hurdles to launching into programming and robotics.

Ouyang says that of the 95 people who paid up, 70 people took the online course. One was younger than 12, and another was over 60. Even if pre-teens are their target, the structure of their course could garner much broader appeal.

Swarbuddies, an adorable group of mobile bots that roll around on wheels, is NarwhalEdu’s second take. A Kickstarter video shows just how cute they are: They glow! They roll around in formation! They make friends with your cat! What can’t they do.



Your task, when they arrive in the mail, is to program the bots to coordinate and interact with each other. And they're completely customizable, you can paint patterns on them, or outfit them with animal-themed headgear, also supplied by NarwhalEdu. "We thought if we found it cool other people would find it cool too."

[NarwhalEdu](#) has been introducing Swarmbuddies to people at demonstrations and meet-ups in the Greater Boston area. They're hoping to fund the project on Kickstarter. Ouyang also plans to partner with after-school programs and summer camps for hands-on teaching sessions with high-schoolers soon.

Nidhi Subbaraman writes about science and research. Email her at nidhi.subbaraman@globe.com.

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